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ABSTRACT

The term "gender schema" refers to the map or network that incorporates and modifies incoming information pertaining to gender so that it can be utilized. Gender schemas have observable effects, resulting in enhanced recall and shorter response latencies. J. L. Kuethe noted that schemas can be activated by social objects. The current study investigated the possibility of activating the gender schema through interaction with a social object that exhibited stereotypically gender related characteristics. The results of a study examining the gender schemas of female university students are reported. Twenty subjects participated in a computerized reaction-time task designed to measure gender schematicity. An experimental condition was designed to activate or call up the individual's gender schema. No significant interaction between gender schematicity and condition was found. Results did suggest a tendency for those in the experimental condition to respond more quickly to the feminine traits than those in the control condition. This was reversed with the career dimension, however. Those in the experimental condition responded more quickly to traits and more slowly to careers. Subjects were gender schematic, responding more quickly to feminine traits than to neutral traits and to masculine careers more quickly than to feminine careers. An appendix provides the scripts for both the experimental and control conditions. (Contains 42 references.) (Author)

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Social Activation of the Gender Schema in Female College Students

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Running Head: GENDER SCHEMA

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Abstract

The term "gender schema" refers to the map or network which incorporates and modifies incoming information pertaining to gender, so that it can be utilized. Gender schemas have observable effects (Bem, 1981), resulting in enhanced recall and in shorter response latencies (Taylor and Crocker, 1981). Kuethe (1962) notes that schemas can be activated by social objects. The current study investigates the possibility of activating the gender schema through interaction with a social object which exhibits stereotypically gender related characteristics.

The results of a study examining the gender schemas of female university students are reported. Twenty subjects participated in a computerized reaction-time task designed to measure gender schematicity. An experimental condition was designed to activate or call up the individual's gender schema. No significant interaction between gender schematicity and condition was found. Results did suggest a tendency for those in the experimental condition to respond more quickly to the feminine traits than those in the control condition. This was reversed with the career dimension, however. Those in the experimental condition responded more quickly to traits and more slowly to careers. Subjects were gender schematic, responding more quickly to feminine traits than to neutral traits and to masculine careers more quickly than to feminine careers.

Social Activation of the Gender Schema in Female College Students

Schemas

A schema is a structure that integrates and processes incoming information so that it can be incorporated into the existing information network. The importance of the individual's own organizing framework in the recall of information was demonstrated in Bartlett's (1932) classic studies in memory. Bartlett conceptualized a central organizing framework made up of cognitive structures (schemas) that organize and direct experience and are open to change (Archer & Lloyd, 1985). A map or pattern of well-integrated knowledge structures is thus provided through interaction with the environment. Graesser and Nakamura (1982) suggest that it is useful to view information as having certain variables or gaps which are filled as the schema guides the processing of the incoming information.

Schematic information processing, while efficient and necessary, can at times be a liability. Taylor and Crocker (1981) suggest that because schematic processing results in selective attention, encoding, and retrieval, it will also lead to information loss. Individuals who employ the wrong schema may also: encode all the wrong data, define ambiguous or inconsistent information as being schema-consistent, use the wrong criteria in evaluating behavior, form incorrect expectations, and employ inappropriate behavioral scripts. While

schematic processing is thought to be necessary, it may also contribute to loss or inaccurate coding of information.

Gender Schemas

Cognitive structures concerned with processing information about gender have been referred to as gender schemas (Bem, 1981a; Liben & Signorella 1980; Martin & Halverson, 1981). Money and Erhardt (1972) suggest that, in establishing gender identity, each child establishes two schemas that have immense power over social interactions and expectations. One schema includes that which is feminine and the other includes that which is masculine. Money and Tucker (1975) explain that one schema tells you what to expect of your sex, including yourself, while the other tells you what to expect of and how to react to, the opposite sex. These gender schemas can be described as maps or structures for encoding information regarding gender identity and sex roles.

Bem (1981) proposed a model for the schematic processing of gender-related information. Bem (1984) suggests that children not only learn the content-specific information about gender, but also learn to invoke this heterogeneous network of sex-related associations in order to organize and evaluate new information. The child learns to use the gender schema as it is evolving. The gender schema is thought to increasingly guide information processing. This model proposes that individuals can thus become schematic for either, both, or neither gender.

Markus, Crane, Bernstein, and Siladi (1982) propose an alternative approach to the schematic processing of gender-

related information, based on self schema theory. This approach emphasizes the self-relevant aspects of gender schematicity. They explain that self schemas are constructed from previously processed information regarding the self, and subsequently influence both input and output of self-relevant information. Once established, these schemas are thought to function as selective devices which determine whether information is attended to, how it is organized and encoded, and how much importance is attached to it. Self Schema theory proposes that through continuous organization and evaluation of our own and other's behavior, we come to develop knowledge structures which aid us in developing self concepts. This alternate formulation proposes that individuals may demonstrate gender-schematic processing with respect to both feminine and masculine dimensions of gender-related information.

The activation of an individual's gender schema may influence how he or she encodes information about herself and others as well as how he or she chooses to behave. McKenzie-Mohr and Zanna (1990) suggest that the use of a schema may also result in behaviors which are in keeping with the schema. The activation of an inappropriate schema may contribute to discomfort or inappropriate behavior, as well as cognitive reliance on a less-than-appropriate schema.

Gender schemas can not be measured directly. It is not possible to see or touch these maps. Schematic processing does, however, have observable effects. Bem (1981) notes that

schematic individuals should be more likely to organize information in schema-relevant categories and should spontaneously choose to make distinctions along these categories. The use of a schema results in shorter response latencies for information which is consistent with that schema (Taylor & Crocker, 1981). Schemas can thus be measured in terms of speed of processing of gender related information.

Gender Schemas and Sex Typing

The gender schema is thought to play a role in sex-typing. Bem (1981) refers to individuals being gender-schematic, meaning that they have "a generalized readiness to encode and organize information... in terms of the culture's definitions of masculinity and femininity" (p. 1193, 1982). This schema provides the map or system against which to measure oneself. Bem (1984, p. 187) proposes that "sex-typing derives in part from gender schematic processing"; from the "assimilation of the self concept itself to the gender schema". Money and Tucker (1975) warn that a child encouraged to sex-code all behavior may grow into an adult who is so overconscious of sex differences, that she or he will fail to notice similarities between the sexes. According to Markus (1990), when the self is conceived of as primarily feminine or masculine, this frame of reference may limit the range of options to those which are sex-typed. When the feminine or masculine schema is developed to the exclusion of other equally appropriate self-schemas, one may become sex-typed. The gender schema is thought to play a crucial role in efficient

sex-typing.

Problems Associated with Sex Typing

Professionals in the helping field have become increasing concerned with sex-typing as it is thought to be psychologically damaging and to hinder development (Dreman, 1982). It has been argued that through sex-typed female socialization, women are literally taught to respond to stress in powerless, helpless ways, and are thus made more susceptible to depression (Cox & Radloff, 1984; Radloff,1980). Femininity or higher femininity scores have been found to be positively correlated with higher levels of neuroticism, low assertiveness, and low self esteem (Ray and Lovejoy, 1984). Therefore conformity to sex-typed expectations may be maladaptive.

Individual Differences in Gender Schematicity

Gender schema theory has focused largely on individual differences in gender schematicity. For Bem, being gender schematic means that a person has a "generalized readiness to encode information-including information about the self - in terms of the culture's definitions of masculinity and femininity" (p. 1193, 1982). Bem (1981a) says "highly gender schematic individuals do not differ from others in their ability to organize information on the basis of gender, but in their threshold for doing so spontaneously" (p.197). Gender schematic individuals can be seen as having a more readily available "map" for gender-related information. Thus, people exhibit individual

differences in gender schematicity.

Self schema theory (Markus, Crane, Bernstein & Siladi, 1982) proposes that individuals may be classified as feminine schematic, masculine schematic, schematic for both classes of information, or aschematic. Markus et al. (1982) did find that individuals were better at remembering information that was gender-appropriate for their gender, and that androgynous individuals responded as quickly to feminine items as to masculine items, lending support to the classification emphasis.

Individuals are thought to differ in levels of gender schematicity. Signorella and Frieze, (1986, cited in Lips, 1988) found that most individuals are not strongly gender-schematic. That is, their masculinity or femininity is not central to their self concept. Thus, for some individuals, the gender schema does not play a large role in their self concept.

Situational Influences on the Gender Schema

The availability of a schema may differ across situations, as well as differing for individuals. Individuals may rely on different schemas, depending upon which one is appropriate to the situation at hand. Nisbett and Ross (1980) suggest that this availability should be a focal guide for future study in the area of schema research. Research by Tversky and Kahneman (1974) suggests that this availability determines at least in part which schema is chosen or called up over other, equally appropriate schemas. Taylor and Crocker (1981) note that this availability depends partly upon how recently the particular schema has been

activated or called up. Bargh, Bond, Lombard, and Tota (1986) demonstrated that the priming of a schema increased its accessibility. McKenzie-Mohr and Zanna (1990) found that exposure to nonviolent pornography was correlated with increased cognitive and behavioral sexism in gender schematic males. They suggest that this occurred through a priming of the subject's heterosexuality schema. McKenzie-Mohr and Zanna suggest that factors such as dress, setting and women's behavior need to be examined as possible primers of a heterosexuality schema. They suggested that these areas need to be examined as possible triggers of other schemas as well.

There may be cues which trigger the gender-schema, as schemas in general can be triggered. Mills and Tyrrel (1983) suggest that situational factors should be taken into account. Kuethe (1962a) found that most people organize a given set of social objects in a similar manner, influenced more by environmental factors than by individual factors. Kuethe and Weingartner state (1964) that exposure to social objects will activate social schemas, and that the specific content of the social objects will determine which schema is activated or called up. Thus a schema can be situationally aroused or triggered by social objects.

Statement of Problem and Hypothesis

The current investigation explored the activation of gender schemas. No individual constantly relies on the gender schema; the gender schema is not consistently in use. It is proposed,

rather, that this schema is called up or activated in response to certain cues. It was thus hypothesized that subjects in the experimental condition would exhibit increased gender schematicity, as measured by decreased response latencies.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 20 female undergraduates enrolled in psychology courses who received extra credit for their participation in the study.

Materials

The stimuli words used to measure gender schematicity consisted of attributes and careers. The traits presented consisted of adjectives chosen or adapted from the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) (Spence et al., 1975) M and F scales, and from the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). Phrases were reduced where possible, to single words, to avoid confounding the latency results. Careers consisted of a list drawn from the work of Croxton, Van Rensslaer, Dutton, and Ellis (1989), Garland and Smith (1981), Kalin, Stoppard, and Burt (1980), Panek, Rush, and Greenawalt (1977) and O'Connor (1982). These researchers have found that these careers are socially accepted as falling into one of the three categories: neutral, masculine, or feminine.

All stimuli for the response latency and attribute rating were presented on a computer monitor. An existing computer program was modified for this procedure.

Procedure

Subjects were scheduled individually so as to avoid contact with one another. Upon arrival, subjects entered the waiting room, where they experienced the social stimulus or the control condition.

Subjects in the experimental condition experienced a gender schema stimulus or trigger. A paid confederate served as this stimulus. The confederate was present in the waiting room and interacted with each subject separately for 7 minutes prior to the response latency task. Her script, that of a stereotypically feminine woman, was drawn from the work of Croxton, Van Rensslaer, Dutton, and Ellis (1989), Garland and Smith (1981), Kalin, Stoppard, and Burt (1980), Panek, Rush, and Greenawalt (1977), Marone, (1988) and O'Connor (1982). The scripts are presented in the appendix. Subjects in the control condition waited alone in the waiting room for seven minutes prior to beginning the response time task.

Subjects were then asked to begin the reaction time experiment using the computer. Response time latency was used to measure the gender schema. Individuals first completed an initial practice trial using five neutral adjectives. Once it was established that they were able to manipulate the keys and understand the instructions, they moved on to the attribution/latency task. A baseline response latency was measured at the start of the experiment. The computer presented

a series of cues, to which the subject was asked to respond "yes" or "no" by depressing the appropriate key. The average of the response times formed the baseline response latency. Stimuli were presented individually, in random order, on the screen, accompanied by a beep to orient the subject to the task. The subject's task was to determine whether each word displayed was self-descriptive, and indicate her response by depressing one of two keyboard keys labelled "me" or "not me" for the self attribution task. Each stimulus appeared and remained on the screen until a response was made. The clock was activated when a stimulus was presented and stopped when the subject depressed either button. The baseline response time was subtracted from the experimental response latency between presentation and response. Difference between response latency means reflects the availability of the gender schema.

Design

A 2 X 3 design (group: experimental versus control) x (gender of word: feminine, masculine, or neutral) nested ANOVA was conducted. One way ANOVAs were also conducted.
Average response latencies were used as dependent variables.

Results

While no significant interaction was found, results suggest tendencies in the expected direction.

Traits

Results indicate that those in the experimental condition responded more quickly to traits than did those in the control

condition, $F(1,18)=8.05$, $p<.0074$.

Significant main effects were also found with gender of word. Analysis of Variance revealed that response time was shorter for feminine traits than for neutral traits, $F(2,18)=11.47$, $p< 0.001$.

There was also a tendency for those in the experimental condition to respond more quickly to the feminine traits than did those in the control condition. The mean response latency (to feminine traits) for those in the control condition was equal to 18.0596 seconds, and for those in the experimental condition was 15.0623 seconds.

Careers

Individuals in the control condition responded more quickly to the careers than did those in the experimental condition $F(1,18)=9.65$, $p<.0037$.

Response times for masculine careers were shorter than for feminine careers, $F(2,18)=4.62$, $p< 0.0164$.

Those in the control condition tended to respond more quickly to masculine careers than did those in the experimental condition, with the mean response time for the control groups equal to 10.9750 seconds and the mean response time for the experimental group equal to 14.0291 seconds.

Discussion

The lack of a significant interaction between condition (control versus experimental) and gender schematicity may be due to both technical and theoretical difficulties. The sample size

was small (n=20). Individual differences in gender schematicity were not taken into account, and these may interact with the situational cues. Bem (1981a) found that gender schematic individuals were faster than non gender schematic individuals when endorsing sex appropriate stimuli and slower when endorsing sex-inconsistent stimuli. The next study in this series will examine individual differences as well as situational activation, using a much larger sample size.

The trends, though insignificant, were in the expected direction. The experimental condition seemingly facilitated responses to feminine traits, while inhibiting responses to masculine careers.

Those individuals tested are clearly gender schematic for traits, having responded significantly faster to feminine traits than to neutral traits. The fact that masculine careers elicited shorter response times than did feminine careers may indicate that careers are more often coded along some dimension other than gender. This explanation is further supported by the findings that the response latencies for those in the experimental condition were significantly shorter for traits, and longer for careers, than for those in the control condition. It may be that careers are encoded or represented by some other schema. For example, a prestige dimension might confound the gender dimension, as masculine careers traditionally carry greater prestige that do feminine careers. If those careers coded as masculine are more frequently encoded along some dimension other

than gender, then activation of the gender schema should increase the response latency. Schemas may represent many different domains of knowledge (Graesser & Nakamura, 1982).

The directional differences between the two analyses (traits and careers) suggest that further research is needed into the different dimensions of the gender schema, which may simply be more often invoked for traits than it is for careers. Gender Schemas are necessary to engage in efficient sex-role stereotyping, although one does not necessarily follow from the other. Previous research has primarily concentrated on individual differences in gender schematicity. While these differences clearly play a role, there may also be environmental triggers which prime or call up the gender schema. It may be possible to better understand the role stereotyped expectations play in the lives of women, through better understanding of the functioning of the gender schema. This understanding will need to include the interaction between individual differences and situational influences.

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Appendix

Script for Experimental Condition

The confederate was introduced by the experimenter as "my friend". Both the confederate and the experimenter wore pastel dresses. The confederate was seated on a sofa, working on a needlepoint project. After each subject was seated, they were handed an informed consent document, and a Bridal magazine "to write on". The confederate was friendly and inquired about the subject's life, offering verbal reinforcement ("gushing") for those conversational items which are feminine, and mild disapproval for that which was neutral or masculine. Each subject was verbally reinforced for feminine items of apparel or interests.

Script for Control Condition

The confederate was introduced as "my research assistant" by the experimenter. Both confederate and experimenter were dressed in a neutral manner, wearing trousers and oxford button down shirts, faces will be free from make-up. The confederate was reading one of several SAS manuals. One of these was handed to each subject "to write on" as she signed the informed consent document. This woman was friendly, but less interested in chatting. She was not interested in sharing personal details of either her life or the life of the subject. She expressed mild disapproval about feminine items of conversation, but responded to neutral information positively.

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